

The writer/star of 'Shaun of the Dead' discusses zombies with the Grandfather of the genre (2005)



[George Romero and Simon Pegg to talk terror and cannibalism](#)

You can't get the chambermaids these days. While prosthetic gore might be a novelty to the Dorchester's finest, it's meat and drink to the filmmakers nattering away in one of the hotel's suites. With 1968's 'Night of the Living Dead' and sequels 'Dawn of the Dead' (1978) and 'Day of the Dead' (1985), George A Romero delivered plentiful gore and a bitingly satirical take on contemporary America. Among his devotees were Simon Pegg and his 'Spaced' director Edgar Wright, whose affectionate pastiche, 'Shaun of the Dead' (2004), led to friendship with Romero. The latest entry in George's own cycle, 'Land of the Dead', sees human survivors holed up in a swanky skyscraper, 'Fiddlers Green', surrounded by slums. Outside, the walking dead begin to close in...

Simon Pegg My first question has to be: are you sick of talking about zombies?

George A Romero Uh, yeah.

SP Of course. 'Cause it's been 37 years since 'Night...' came out. I was wondering if, when you were making the first one, you ever realised that you'd return to the story as often as you did.

GR No. I resisted doing another one for a while. The movie actually made some money when it first came out, but I didn't want to get typecast; I didn't want to just do horror. I didn't think of them as zombies. It was the '60s, man, we were just smoking and talking about politics. It was about revolution. I wanted to see what happened on that first night and how people dealt with it.

SP Your 'Dead' movies are always from the point of view of a group of people who really don't know what the hell's going on. They're in a small environment...

GR ...isolated in one way or another, either through choice or circumstance.

Was the change in America after Bush came to power a spur to return to the series?

GR I had written a script before 9/11 and it was much more about homeland problems – AIDS and homelessness and the vanishing middle class. And a lot of things were in there; we had this vehicle driving through a little village, mowing people down and wondering why they're pissed off. All of a sudden, after Iraq, that just acquired more resonance. And we did a few things: we made the Fiddlers Green building taller to make it represent the World Trade Centre; and I threw in lines like 'I don't negotiate with terrorists.' I had a little more fun with it.

SP September 11 happened when we were writing ['Shaun of the Dead'] and it informed our writing process. We suddenly saw how people reacted in the event of massive social upheaval, and the way that the little problems in your life don't go away. You don't stop being frightened of spiders just because the world's blown up.

There are elements of 'Shaun...' that are now hard to watch without thinking of the London bombings: confused news coverage, the trickle of information, not knowing what's going on.

SP It was a strange feeling on that morning because there were lots of sirens everywhere and you couldn't help – in the most unflippant way possible – thinking: God, this is a similar thing. But the film generally is about how people deal with the dissolution of order and the usual way of doing things. George, your 'Dead' movies always reflected a certain something about society at the time: revolution with 'Night...'; the whole consumerist metaphor which is a brilliantly comic aspect of 'Dawn...'; and then with 'Day...' there's a sort of vivisection thing...

GR ...and there's nobody you like. That was the beginning of everybody saying, 'I don't trust my mother.'

SP To the point where you start sympathising with the zombies.

GR I tried to do a little bit of that in 'Dawn...'. We talked a little bit about that in wardrobe.

SP With the football player and the nun.

GR Yeah, a little character. In my mind they were us; we've changed, that's all.

SP It makes them tragic as well; you see people plucked from a moment. There's a great guy in 'Day...' who's got a pinny on and gloves, like he was bitten when he was washing up. In that one detail there's a great little tragic story.

GR In the [2004] remake of 'Dawn...' everybody's in Nikes and jeans.

SP Well, they have to be because they've got to keep running. I was going to ask what your thoughts were on the 'Dawn...' remake.

GR It was better than I expected. I thought it was a good action film. The first 15, 20 minutes were terrific, but it sort of lost its reason for being. It was more of a video game. I'm not terrified of things running at me; it's like Space Invaders. There was nothing going on underneath.

TO Has the recent batch of zombie films offered any inspiration?

GR You know, it doesn't. I'm not a student that way; I don't rush out and see it when it comes out. The simplest way to put it is: I don't really care.

What was your take on 'Shaun...'?

GR I just loved it, man; I just loved it. I had no idea it existed. This guy from Universal brought a print to a local cinema in Florida. I called these guys right away; I thought it was just wonderful.

SP It was a nerve-racking day, because we knew he was watching it, and of all the feedback we were ever going to get, what George Romero thought was the most important. Then we got the call and it was like: it's worth all the effort now. We don't even have to release it.

GR Oh, man; there was just such affection in it.

SP Does it shock you, this fan response to your films? Worldwide there are whole conventions dedicated entirely to your work.

GR What's not to like? It's just fabulous; you get to travel and meet people and do all the good stuff.

SP I have to ask you about that brilliant night in Pittsburgh [in June for a preview screening of 'Land of the Dead']. It was officially named George Romero Day by the mayor, wasn't it?

GR Yeah. What day was that? I have to remember to go back on that day!

SP It was the greatest night. Me and Edgar flew over and met a lot of the cast of 'Day of the Dead'. I remember just after the film Quentin Tarantino – who George hadn't met before – was going on and on, being very flattering, and George just turned around and went 'Oh, grow up.'

TO You and Edgar pop up briefly in 'Land...' as zombies. How did that come about?

SP I think we said to [Romero's make-up supervisor] Greg, 'Can we be extras?' And, you know, the internet is terrible now for leaking things. Some interviewer said to George, 'Is it true the 'Shaun of the Dead' guys are going to be in the film?' And George kind of went, 'Okay, I guess so.'

GR Cool with me! I was flattered.

How did you rate them as zombies?

GR Well [laughs] one woman got too close! Simon actually got to her!

SP I'm not gonna hold back! It's 'Land of the Dead', I'm not going to be a pussy zombie! Her shoulder was in my mouth range and I bit it. I'm sorry. I've got to keep it real, you know.

Like all the 'Dead' films, 'Land...' ends on an ambiguous note.

GR That was always my problem. My biggest thing was [avoiding] this restoration of order which seems to be in most horror fiction. Why do you do it except to upset the apple cart? But I don't know how you'd ever end it. As long as the world stays fucked up I can keep doing this.